What's wrong with the Religious Right
David Bruce, Citizens Project

Several months ago, on a bright, sunny Sunday afternoon, a young woman and middle aged man rang my doorbell. When I answered, the young woman somewhat nervously stated that they had come to confirm "the census" and asked if I would be "good enough" to participate. I was a little suspicious: "You mean the official *U.S.* census?" They both nodded affirmatively, so I asked the young woman "Where are you from?" I looked at her; she looked at the middle aged man and he smiled benevolently and said, "From your local neighborhood church." My suspicion grew; I couldn't help but ask the young woman, why *she* hadn't responded to my question, didn't she know where she was from? But never mind, confirming the census sounded like a civic-minded thing to do regardless of who was putting in the leg work, so I agreed to participate. "Alright, first question: 'Do you believe in God Almighty?" We had just exceeded my limit of tolerable deviance. As a Unitarian, I've actively encouraged tolerance and have developed a sincere personal appreciation for religious and cultural diversity. But I can't stand being lied to; I lost my temper: "There were no questions about God (Almighty or otherwise) on the census; I know; I filled it out; You're lying to me; Why would you lie? Did 'my local neighborhood church' send you here to lie to me? Does Jesus know what you're doing?" By the time I paused to take a breath, they were already half way down the walkway; she, near tears and he assuring her that I was possessed (or something like that).

I had acted badly and I knew it; I was frustrated and disappointed with my own response. Clearly, they were in the wrong but what I had done probably just confirmed all their negative stereotypes of people, like me, who might not choose to attend their "local neighborhood church". Who were these "church" people, and what made them think they had the right to intrude on my Sunday afternoon under false pretenses? Over the next several months, my activities with Citizens Project allowed me a better understanding of what had transpired that afternoon. As you know, Citizens Project is a non profit group concerned about threats to public and private civil liberties posed by certain factions of the religious right. As a member of Citizens Project Board, I've had the opportunity to meet with senior executives from Focus on the Family, attend one of their "Community Impact" seminars and also talk with several other folks involved with "the religious right". Some of what I've discovered might interest you.

Most of my information has been drawn from pamphlets and programs provided by one particular group: Focus on the Family. I hasten to point out that Focus is by no means the most extreme group on "the religious right". In fact, they speak very pejoratively of the "loose canons", "Bible-thumpers" and "bomb-throwers" whom they see as having gone "too far". I really think Focus expected those of us from Citizens Project they invited to attend their

Subject: PFAW-PRESSLIST: Supreme Court Allows Boy Scouts to Discriminate
Date: Wed, 28 Jun 2000 15:15:44 -0400
From: "People For the American Way Foundation (PFAW General Mailbox)" <PFAW@pfaw.org
Reply-To: pfaw-presslist@lists.pfaw.org
To: pfaw-presslist@lists.pfaw.org

>>>

day-long Community Impact Seminar to return and reassure the rest of you that we had nothing to fear from Focus. They miscalculated.

The Community Impact Seminar provided considerable evidence that Focus fully intends to impose their own "Christian solutions" on a wide variety of complex social problems. Claiming the scriptures as the "exclusive", "literal" and "inerrant" word of God, their agenda involves removing barriers between church and state and "re"establishing "Christian rule" in America. Although they've discovered that Christian television and radio programs provide a very effective way to connect "like-minded Christians", the seminar made it clear that social activism in local neighborhood churches is also necessary. Replacing traditional "works of mercy" with "a quest for justice" through locally-coordinated economic and political action transforms their fundamentalist, evangelical beliefs from a source of personal values and spiritual strength to a framework for social, political and judicial change. During the seminar, Focus made a number of theological, philosophical and historical claims concerning the identity of those who shared their views. Before suggesting how we might counter the threat I think they pose, it is important for you to understand who they really are.

Spiritual Claims

Theologically and spiritually speaking, Focus on the Family claims to represent traditional Christian beliefs and values. They paint themselves as somewhat moderate, mainstream representatives of the faith; however, even the surveys they used during the seminar presentations suggested that only a minority of Americans who "claim" to be Christians really accept the Bible as the exclusive, literal and inerrant word of God. A friend, who heads a Biblical Christian organization (seen by some as being even more conservative than Focus) was very quick to admit that the Bible is full of metaphors (i.e., it is not literal). While there are many who claim to be Christians who insist that the Bible is the only (i.e., exclusive) divine revelation, many others accept the possibility that other great religious works also contain revelation and enlightenment. Many such moderate Christians are embarrassed by the dogmatic and exclusive perspectives put forward by groups such as Focus and are eager to disassociate themselves from such groups.

In his book, Evil: the Shadow Side of Reality, author John Sanford recounts the story of the grand inquisitor from Dostoevsky's The Brothers Karamazov. Basically, Christ has returned to earth and the grand inquisitor has had him thrown in prison. It's not that the grand inquisitor believes Jesus is an imposter; the grand inquisitor accuses Jesus of having come back to disturb and disrupt the work the church has been carrying out in his name. The inquisitor claims that the church has "corrected" Christ's teachings which had placed on mankind the impossible burden of being free but which led to too much misery.

Rhode Island and California.

FOR MORE INFORMATION, PLEASE VISIT OUR WEBSITES:

* http://www.HostileClimate.org - Documenting Anti-Gay Discrimination

* http://www.ItsYourCourt.org - The Supreme Court is Your Court!

* "Courting Disaster: How a Scalia-Thomas Supreme Court Would Endanger our Rights and Freedoms" (81 pages, fully annotated, 720 Kb Adobe Acrobat PDF) http://www.itsyourcourt.org/courtingdisaster-fullcopy.pdf

* download free Adobe Acrobat PDF reader plug-in http://www.adobe.com/prodindex/acrobat/readstep.html

==========

Press Releases -- http://www.pfaw.org/news/

==========

*** LIST SUBSCRIPTION INFORMATION ***

SUBSCRIBE to the People For the American Way Foundation Press Release distribution list by signing up for our Activist Network at

http://www.pfaw.org/activist/

OR send the following message:

TO: majordomo@lists.pfaw.org
SUBJECT: subscribe pfaw-presslist
BODY: subscribe pfaw-presslist

UNSUBSCRIBE from the Press Release distribution list by sending the following message:

TO: majordomo@lists.pfaw.org
SUBJECT: unsubscribe pfaw-presslist
BODY: unsubscribe pfaw-presslist

Your requests will be handled automatically. If you have problems or questions, please send them to webmaster@pfaw.org

---

Our Privacy Policy - http://www.pfaw.org/about/privacypolicy.shtml

==========

People For the American Way Foundation
2000 M Street, NW, Suite 400
Washington DC 20036
http://www.pfaw.org

202 467 4999 phone
202 293 2672 fax
pfaw@pfaw.org

The church had lifted this burden of freedom so that people could be happy. Needless to say, Sanford as well as many others who call themselves Christians do not share the grand inquisitors perspective. As Sanford suggests:

> The greatest ethical value, according to Jesus, is to become a free person, and this means a conscious person... When we are told to conform to a standard of goodness imposed by collective authority, and to repress everything from our consciousness that contradicts this, we have lost our freedom; we are no longer conscious people responsible for ourselves. But in Jesus' ethic man is left with the alternatives life poses, the problem of his own duality and the necessity for psychological honesty. Growth in consciousness is valued more highly by Jesus than conformity to "goodness." Freedom is of the highest psychological value, because this alone makes possible the development of consciousness and love. (p.83)

Focus' implicit insistence on accepting a particular interpretation of scripture as the literal and inerrant "truth" obviates individual conscious decision making. The perspective taken by the grand inquisitor and Focus on the Family requires individual cognitive abstinence. However, it is unfair to blame Christianity itself for the imposition of mind-numbing servitude as the price of salvation. There are still grand inquisitors among us but many modern Christians I know are much more comfortable with the perspective Sanford expresses.

One last point to be made involves the claim of the "inerrancy" of the scriptures. The belief that a work as extensive and eclectic as the Bible is without error necessarily rests on the assumption that the work itself is without internal contradiction. However, when we read in Matthew 5:9: "Blessed are the peacemakers", it is a little disconcerting to read Jesus' words several chapters later (Matthew 10:34) "Think not that I come to send peace on earth, I come not to send peace but to send a sword." Similarly there appears to be an inconsistency between the admonition in Matthew (26:52) that "All that take the sword shall perish by it." and the direction in Luke (22:36) that "He who hath no sword, let him sell his garments and buy one". However, it is in Luke (6:27) where Jesus tells his disciples to "Love thine enemies; do good to them that hate you" but John (2:15) tells that in dealing with his own enemies (the money changers in the temple), Jesus "made a scourge of small cords and drove them out of the temple ... and poured out the changer's money and overthrew their tables" (tough love perhaps?).

In an attempt to understand Focus on the Family's support of Amendment 2, a friend of mine called and asked for Biblical references for their position. She was referred to the story of Lot and the Sodomites in the book of Genesis. Here's how the story goes: two angels were visiting Lot one afternoon, when a

Subject: **PFAW-PRESSLIST: Supreme Court Sows Confusion With Church/State Ruling**
Date: Wed, 28 Jun 2000 14:56:40 -0400
From: "People For the American Way Foundation (PFAW General Mailbox)" <PFAW@pfaw.org
Reply-To: pfaw-presslist@lists.pfaw.org
To: pfaw-presslist@lists.pfaw.org

>>>

rowdy crowd from nearby Sodom came by and demanded that Lot send out the young men that they (the Sodomites) might know them (in the Biblical sense). Being a man of high virtue who loved God, Lot resisted and said "No; ...take my young daughters instead." Several chapters later, the young daughters exact their revenge by getting Lot drunk and partying with him all night long (in the modern sense of the word). We all know what God did to Sodom (and Gomorrah as well) and I suspect if one accepts the Bible as the "exclusive", "literal" and "inerrant" word of God, one might consider this story as a legitimate basis for denying gays and lesbians the right to protection from discrimination. However, what is less clear is how one might avoid taking this same story as an indication of God's support for child prostitution and incest. The point of all this is that Focus's claim that the Bible is the exclusive, literal and inerrant word of God is much farther than most contemporary Christians want to go; and claiming that this view is representative of most Christians or even necessary is simply untrue.

Philosophical Claims

From a philosophical perspective, Focus on the Family claims they represent *objectivism*, the approach shared by "Aristotle, Christianity and 20 centuries of Western Culture". However, once again there is Quite a gulf between their claim and reality. Since Aristotle died nearly 500 years before the scriptures were collected into anything resembling a New Testament, it hard to argue he believed that they were the exclusive, literal and inerrant work of God (but perhaps I'm becoming too literal). There is, in fact, a philosophical approach known as objectivism within which Aristotle fits. Technically speaking, Focus' belief in the literal inerrancy of scripture also does qualify for inclusion in this category. However, since others in this category also include the modern writer Ayn Rand and the late, great, 18th century German philosopher Immanual Kant, characterizing the Focus philosophy as "objectivist" is like calling a tomato a fruit; although technically true, it is clearly not representative of the category.

In fact the closest I came to finding a philosophical category which was consistent with Focus's approach was scholasticism. This movement dominated Western Culture from the 9th until the 17th century. It combined a fixed religious dogma with the mystical and intuitional tradition of patristic philosophy in an attempt to document natural evidence consistent with pre-existing religious assumptions. Human reason was not employed to discover truth but to explore, explicate, and defend scriptural truths that were already known. These "truths" themselves were not subject to scrutiny, doubt or inquiry (this would have been "heresy"). Historically speaking, this approach formed the basis for canon law and feudalism and ushered in the Dark Ages, the Spanish Inquisition and was exemplified by the conduct of the Salem witch trials.

==========

*** LIST SUBSCRIPTION INFORMATION ***

SUBSCRIBE to the People For the American Way Foundation Press Release distribution list by signing up for our Activist Network at

http://www.pfaw.org/activist/

OR send the following message:

TO: majordomo@lists.pfaw.org
SUBJECT: subscribe pfaw-presslist
BODY: subscribe pfaw-presslist

UNSUBSCRIBE from the Press Release distribution list by sending the following message:

TO: majordomo@lists.pfaw.org
SUBJECT: unsubscribe pfaw-presslist
BODY: unsubscribe pfaw-presslist

Your requests will be handled automatically. If you have problems or questions, please send them to webmaster@pfaw.org

---

Our Privacy Policy - http://www.pfaw.org/about/privacypolicy.shtml

==========

People For the American Way Foundation
2000 M Street, NW, Suite 400
Washington DC 20036
http://www.pfaw.org

202 467 4999 phone
202 293 2672 fax
pfaw@pfaw.org